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For nation's energy sources, history may repeat itself

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — U.S. energy prospects for the next 40 years are partly promising but also carry some uncertainty. That will likely create boom-and-bust cycles for energy sources similar to what the nation has seen in the past 40 years, according to panelists at a Richard Stockton College energy conference.

The conversations among 150 guests, energy company leaders and environmentalists Wednesday were wide-ranging — from memories of gasoline at 36 cents a gallon in 1971, to discussion of developments in biomass, which involves converting matter such as dead trees and other forest residues into energy products.

In looking forward, one industry leader, Michael Fischette, chief executive officer of Voorhees-based Concord Engineering, predicted that “nuclear and renewables will dominate in the future,” even as he noted nuclear development is currently in a holding pattern.

The “Energy 40/40” conference was tied into Stockton’s recent 40th anniversary. The college opened its doors in 1971.

The next 40 years will be as unpredictable as the past 40 years, Fischette said.

“There’s been tremendous peaks and valleys in the energy industry,” Fischette said. “This is our 15 minutes of fame. Twenty years ago, if you mentioned energy, the conversation stopped.”

Fischette said the nation will be served well by staying diverse in its use of fuels.

Nuclear power was at one time considered the unchallenged future primary option for energy, Fischette said. But the technology has since been confronted with compromising occurrences such as the Three Mile Island partial core meltdown in 1979 and partial meltdowns in multiple reactors in Japan last year.

Fischette said he expects nuclear to bounce back, though conceded, “I don’t think you’ll see another nuclear plant built in this region in the next 10 or 15 years.”

The conference was sponsored by the college's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy. The Hughes Center since its inception in 2008 has brought in well-

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known speakers for various programs, including three former New Jersey governors — Brendan T. Byrne, Thomas H. Kean and Christine T. Whitman — and one future governor, Chris Christie, who visited while he was U.S. Attorney. The keynote speaker at the energy conference was Lisa Jackson, President Obama's environmental chief.

Other panelists spoke about infrastructure, energy portfolios, building efficiency, shale gas and alternative energy.

Ben Parvey, CEO of Blue Sky Power, a Camden company that develops large-scale alternative energy projects for colleges, hospitals, and government facilities, said the market is welcoming to improved technology and new approaches. In his company's case, clients made bets on large-scale alternative energy because, Parvey said, "we showed you can have budget certainty" in future bills.

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